

Thinking Women: The Case of the Spinster Detective in Mary Roberts Rinehart's *The Bat*

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The Bat (1920) by Mary Roberts Rinehart, written in collaboration with Avery Hopwood, was an extraordinarily successful mystery-thriller that ran for 867 performances on Broadway, making it the second longest running production of the 1920s and the most widely seen American play of its time that might be described as feminist.¹ *The Bat* flew into the theater on August 23, 1920, exactly five days after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, and this mystery-thriller can be understood as explicitly championing the agency, independence, and, most significantly, intelligence of women. The play's main character, Cornelia Van Gorder, is a "spinster detective" who solves the mystery, defeats the villains, and proves that a woman's wits are a match for any man's. In the 1920s, both Cornelia Van Gorder and Mary Roberts Rinehart existed in a changing world, where women gained the right to vote, attended universities in greater numbers, increasingly participated in the work force, and questioned Victorian gender roles and social mores. But they still had to fight against the limited options available to women in a patriarchal society, and *The Bat* represents the success of both Cornelia and Rinehart in realms dominated by men.² Combining historical research and dramaturgical analysis, this article explores the

construction and subversion of gender roles evident in the text, performance, and production history of *The Bat*, revealing the ideological tensions surrounding "thinking women" at a pivotal moment in American cultural history.

"A Resourceful Old Lady": The Indomitable Miss Van Gorder

Miss Cornelia Van Gorder is an upper-class and middle-aged woman whose main occupation seems to be knitting. To escape the hustle and bustle of New York City, she has rented the Long Island mansion of a recently deceased banker, Courtleigh Fleming, accompanied by her comic maid and her ingénue niece. The niece is secretly engaged to a bank clerk who is the prime suspect in a recent robbery at Fleming's bank, and perhaps the missing money is linked to the mysterious threats Cornelia has received, telling her to leave the house. Adding to the suspense are reports of a super criminal known as "The Bat" who has been terrorizing the area. As the critic for the *Billboard* noted at the time:

The program asks that the climax of the story be kept a secret. That is an easy thing to do because a crooked

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lawyer could not repeat the details of the plot. Suffice to say it has to do with a couple of murders, a lot of stolen money, two young lovers, and a resourceful old lady. (James)

That “resourceful old lady” initially calls a professional detective to come to the mansion and discover who is trying to drive her away, but she soon decides that Detective Anderson is incompetent, and she must take over the case herself.

Rinehart and Hopwood establish Cornelia’s desire for dangerous exploits—and the subversion of gender roles—from the very beginning of the play. As she reads theories about the secret identity of the Bat, presumed to be a member of “respectable society,” Cornelia opines, “I wish I were a man! I’d like to see any doctor, lawyer, or merchant of my acquaintance lead a double life without my suspecting it!” (497). The novelization of *The Bat*, published in 1926 and reportedly ghostwritten by the future Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Stephen Vincent Benét (Cohn 143), goes further into Cornelia’s psychology and objectives when introducing her to the reader in a chapter entitled “The Indomitable Miss Van Gorder”:

Patrician to her finger tips, independent to the roots of her hair, she preserved, at sixty-five, a humorous and quenchless curiosity in regard to every side of life, which even the full and crowded years that already lay behind her had not entirely satisfied. [...] As a little girl she had hesitated between wishing to be a locomotive engineer or a famous bandit—and when she had found, at seven, that the accident of sex would probably debar her from either occupation, she had resolved fiercely that some time before she died she would show the world in general and the Van Gorder clan in particular that a woman was quite as capable of dangerous exploits as a man. So far her life, while exciting enough at moments, had never actually been dangerous and time was slipping away without giving her an opportunity to prove her hardiness of heart. (17–18)

Both gender and age are factors in Cornelia’s decision to stay at the mansion, face down danger, and beat the professional (male) detective to solving the crime. She has spent a lifetime yearning for adventure, and she recognizes that she is running out of time, so she must do it now, if she is to do it at all. There is also a social dimension to her desire: she wants to prove the fortitude not just of herself but of all women, and prove it not just to herself but to “the world in general.” She is on a distinctly feminist mission.

Detective Anderson dismisses Cornelia’s endeavors as the meddling of an old woman who has read too many mystery novels. The professional detective’s disdain is expressed in gendered terms as he condescendingly plays along with Cornelia and says, “Anything to help a sister in the profession!” (539). Cornelia gives as good as she gets, teasing Anderson that perhaps he should try knitting when he wants to think, and he later responds that perhaps Cornelia should try smoking a cigar. This exchange is clearly meant to be comic, since it presumes that the audience will find a man knitting and a woman smoking a cigar equally ridiculous, but the transgression of gender roles is crucial to Cornelia’s success as a detective. In Act 3, she uses a wire hairpin to pick a lock but also carries a loaded gun, employing both “feminine” and “masculine” tools. When another character patronizingly asks her “Is this something else you saw Mr. Gillette do?” (referring to the actor William Gillette who famously played Sherlock Holmes on stage), Cornelia snaps back, “I’m using my wits! I never saw *any* man do that” (553). The fantasy, then, is that a woman who sees plays and reads mystery novels—like, say, those written by Mary Roberts Rinehart—might break through her presumed gender role in order to become the heroic detective in a real murder case.

Cornelia’s fortitude becomes more pronounced when compared with the attitudes of the two other women in the play. Lizzie, the hysterical maid, functions as comic relief, but also as a significant contrast to her employer, who has nerves of steel. While Lizzie is always ready to accept supernatural explanations and hide under the bed, Cornelia presses forward with rational observations and calm logic. Cornelia’s niece Dale, the romantic ingénue who also functions as the woman-in-peril, also gives over to hysteria. When they are close to solving the final piece of the puzzle, Dale cracks and appeals to masculine authority, crying, “Oh, call the detective. Let’s get through with this thing. I can’t bear any more.” Cornelia calmly asserts her own command of the situation, saying, “Wait. Not yet... I’m not through” (562).

By the final curtain Cornelia has discovered the identities of the bank robbers and the murderer. A total of three villains are responsible for different crimes in the play, and all the criminals are, unsurprisingly, men. The male criminals in *The Bat* represent systems of masculine authority, including the owner of a bank (commerce), a doctor (medicine), and a police detective (law), and they are revealed as sinister threats by a woman who normally does not have much power within those realms. However, it is not only these patriarchal figures who attempt to diminish Cornelia's sense of herself. Nearly all of the characters in the play are at some point dismissive of the spinster detective because of her gender or her age. The dramatic arc of *The Bat* can be understood in terms of Cornelia's empowerment—not just as a woman, but as an old woman. When her niece doubts her abilities, Miss Van Gorder opines, “I wish you young people would remember that even if hair and teeth have fallen out at sixty the mind still functions” (534). One of the ways that Cornelia has kept her mind functioning is that, unlike Lizzie who reads only silly Victorian romance novels, she reads murder mysteries—not unlike those written by Mary Roberts Rinehart.

Rinehart herself embraced getting older, and in her autobiography, published when she was fifty-five years old, she stated,

My early training had bred in me a contempt for that terrible striving for a vanished youth which actuates so many women; the refusal to face middle age, the pathetic self-illusions, the deceits which deceive nobody. To what good? Why? Who cares? (*My Story* 306)

Cornelia is a character without “self-illusions” or “deceit.” Her age has given her life experience, which contains practical knowledge and insight into human behavior, and these are the very tools that allow her to triumph over the greed, duplicity, and violence of men. She is a good detective not despite the fact that she's an aged spinster, but because of it. It is perhaps of some significance that the author has given her heroine the same first name as her own mother, Cornelia Roberts, an intelligent and capable woman forced to take on great responsibilities after her

husband, Mary's father, died by suicide. Later in life, however, Cornelia Roberts suffered a stroke, and Rinehart became the primary caretaker of her incapacitated mother (MacLeod 129). Cornelia Van Gorder can be seen as a tribute to her mother, and also as a fantasy in which her mother maintains her mental and physical capabilities into old age.

“Unashamed of her Spinsterhood”: Performing Female Independence

The Bat represents the earliest and most successful appearance of the spinster detective in the theatrical genre of murder mystery most commonly known as the thriller. Historians date the popularity of this theater genre back to the plays of Wilkie Collins in the 1870s, as well as William Gillette's famous turn in *Sherlock Holmes*, first performed on Broadway in 1899 and frequently revived over the next three decades. Theorists of the thriller have noted certain common elements and conventions of the genre, first and foremost the act of murder and the detection of the criminal, as well as secluded houses, false identities, seemingly supernatural occurrences, thunder storms, red herrings, reversals, and revelations (Carlson). A grim sense of humor frequently pervades the thriller, promising laughs amid the suspense, and the plots often include a young couple in love, thus incorporating a strain of romance as well. All of these factors are evident in *The Bat*, which set the standard for the long-running thrillers that would follow, including *Angel Street* (1941), *Witness for the Prosecution* (1954), *Sleuth* (1970), and *Deathtrap* (1978).³

Into this genre *The Bat* thrusts Cornelia Van Gorder, a sixty-year-old amateur sleuth, who remains the most popular theatrical version of an archetype that became known as the spinster detective. Many of the female sleuths who have been depicted on page, stage, and screen face a dilemma when their crime-solving activities come into conflict with their romantic aspirations. As

Philippa Gates, in her book *Detecting Women: Gender and the Hollywood Detective Film*, notes:

The only female detectives who seem to have avoided this dilemma are those who are either too old—e.g., spinster Jane Marple and widow Jessica Fletcher—or too young—e.g., teenager Nancy Drew—for romantic relationships and thus elude the complications that arise when career and romance compete. (4)

For twenty-first century audiences, “spinster” is likely understood as a disparaging term for an unmarried woman beyond the age at which patriarchal society considers her “marriageable.” But Naomi Braun Rosenthal has argued that, through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the figure of the spinster functioned as “the epitome of independent, talented, and self-sufficient womanhood” (x). The spinster occupied a privileged position, an avatar of what Rosenthal calls “feminine freedom” (13), achieved because she was, in most instances, “well-educated, white, Protestant, and, presumably, [a] daughter of native-born parents” (145). In Rosenthal’s analysis, spinsters were not disdained for what they lacked (i.e., marriage and children), but admired for pursuing a “respectable” alternative to matrimony and motherhood that allowed them to achieve more than “ordinary” women.

Rinehart presents Cornelia Van Gorder as one such admirable spinster, but the lack of admiration for—indeed, the hostility to—female agency expressed by other characters in the play creates the ideological tension that underlies *The Bat*. Joan Warthling Roberts, in her chapter from the collection *Feminism in Women’s Detective Fiction*, describes the spinster as a woman who is categorized as “not sexually interesting to men,” and therefore is ignored because she has no value within the patriarchal society (7). In Rinehart’s play, the spinster’s outsider status is precisely what makes her effective and potentially subversive as a detective. Existing independently and having no romantic or maternal attachments to men, the spinster character maintains a certain distance from the male-dominated world, which allows her to be both more clear-eyed and more critical about the deceptions and misdeeds of men. This also makes the spinster detective something of an underdog, the “little old lady” who, as

Roberts notes, is often “pushed aside and ignored” by the authorities, particularly the professional male detective, but in the end she triumphs and solves the case. A version of this dynamic can be seen in the watershed feminist play *Trifles* (1916) by Susan Glaspell, in which housewives become accidental sleuths, solving a murder mystery even as they are belittled and patronized by the professional detectives, who fail to discern the truth.

Scholars of the literary genre agree that the first spinster detective appeared in 1897 when the novelist Anna Katharine Green introduced Amelia Butterworth in *That Affair Next Door*. Joan Warthling Roberts writes that Miss Butterworth “was different from many of the earlier women detectives” because she was “unmarried... from a distinguished colonial family... financially secure... [and] an independent woman...” (6). Mary Roberts Rinehart appropriated many of these characteristics in the creation of her own spinsters-cum-amateur-detectives, the first being Miss Rachel Innes, who appeared in *The Circular Staircase* in 1908. She re-imagined the archetype in a comic vein beginning in 1911 with her “Tish” series, which followed the adventures of Miss Letitia Carberry. One critic described Tish as “a refreshingly different kind of heroine—a delightful old lady of fifty, adventurous, witty, [and] entirely unashamed of her spinsterhood” (“A Delightful Spinster”). Two other notable spinster detectives arrived in 1927: Dorothy L. Sayers’ Miss Kitty Climpson and, most famously, Agatha Christie’s Miss Jane Marple. The archetype became so familiar that the 1976 parody film *Murder by Death* could make fun of it with Elsa Lanchester playing the spinster sleuth Miss Jessica Marbles.

To fully appreciate the significance of making the spinster detective a central character of a play in 1920, it is helpful to understand how an aging and unmarried woman was often depicted on stage in this era. A striking example, which stands in marked contrast to *The Bat*’s Cornelia, comes from one of Avery Hopwood’s solo endeavors, *The Gold Diggers*, which opened on Broadway in 1919 and ran for 717 performances. The title refers

to chorus girls in Broadway shows who use beauty and charm to entice men into giving them money and expensive gifts—without giving any “favors” in return. The showgirls, however, are fully aware that once they reach a certain age, men will not find them desirable, and their ability to profit off of their beauty will stop.

Hopwood emphasizes this point by introducing for one scene the character Cissie Gray, an aged showgirl who is now reduced to selling soap in order to get by. Cissie is an object of pity for the younger women, and she functions as a cautionary tale, offering them a vision of their fate if they do not profit as much as possible during their youth. The “problem” of the aging woman was evident offstage as well as onstage. In a telling coincidence, the *Billboard* review of *The Gold Diggers* appeared on the same page as an advertisement for Bedford Face Studios, promoting an early version of a facelift. The ad features images of two women—“before” with wrinkles and “after” with smooth skin—and the text “Keep Yourself In Demand: Lifting Does It.” Appearing in a publication aimed at show business insiders, the advertisement makes clear that a woman, and particularly an actress, must “keep young and beautiful” if she is going to remain “in demand.”

The actress who initially played Cissie Gray was Pauline Hall, who had been an operetta star in the 1880s. According to critics reporting on the opening night, Hall’s sentimental scene in the play earned some of the strongest applause of the evening (Lennards; Woollcott “Mr. Belasco’s Season Begins”). Born in 1860, the actress was fifty-nine years old when she performed in *The Gold Diggers*, making her only five years younger than Effie Ellsler, the actress who played Cornelia Van Gorder in *The Bat*. The disparity between woman-as-sexual-object and woman-as-intelligent-and-independent-subject is equally as evident in the life and career of Ellsler as it is in the character she played. Having come from a theatrical family, Effie Ellsler made her name as a young woman in the title role of Steele MacKeye’s play *Hazel Kirke* (1880), which ran for 486 consecutive performances in New York, a record at the time. Over the course of her career,

she was often praised for the strength and intelligence she brought to her roles. For example, in reviewing her starring role in *The Keepsake* (1888), a *New York Times* critic wrote,

Miss Ellsler is an artist of strong individuality, and she cannot adapt herself very easily to the role of the silly heroine. She has a strikingly intelligent face, and her appearance suggests, above everything else, wholesome common sense. (“Amusements”)

A profile of the actress published in 1890 emphasized that “Little Miss Effie Ellsler is, in private life, Mrs. Frank Weston. . . and it is his name that she assumes at all times except when in the theatre” (Dale 273). Ellsler was, as far as the public was concerned, “Miss” onstage and “Mrs.” offstage, highlighting the contingent and often illusory nature of these labels.

Ellsler believed that successful actresses should only marry actors, and that “if an actress marry a man who is not in the profession, she ought to leave the stage at once. It is her duty to her husband, and the only way she will be able to find married happiness” (Dale 277). After thirty more years of playing strong and intelligent women, Ellsler held the same view, espousing in a 1921 interview the importance of “home life” and instructing younger actresses that a woman should give up her career on the stage if her husband asks her to (Sieve). Nevertheless, Ellsler was fiercely dedicated to the theater, performing her role in *The Bat* even on the day her husband died, which led to headlines like “Frank Weston Dead as His Wife Plays.” Such articles implicitly judged Ellsler for not maintaining the proper balance between her role as wife and her role as actress in *The Bat*, but, despite what she may have stated in publicity profiles, she followed her own sense of that balance.

Ellsler stayed in the role of Cornelia for the entire Broadway run of *The Bat*, seldom missing a performance. Publicity came to conflate perseverance of Cornelia in the face of adversity with the perseverance of Ellsler over the course of the long run. On the second to last evening, she collapsed onstage during the show, but, against the advice of her doctors, she insisted on returning the following day to play the final two performances (“Effie Ellsler is Stricken”). *The Bat* marked her

last appearance on Broadway, but she began a career in Hollywood just as the movies began to talk, and some credit her as “the earliest born actress to have had a film career in the sound era” (Nissen 38). Toward the end of her professional life, Ellsler mostly played tough but loving grandmothers. Her last credited film role was in the Zane Grey western *Drift Fence* (1936) as Buster Crabbe’s “granny,” a frontier woman who is not afraid to use a shotgun and stand up to cattle rustlers. Ellsler passed away in 1942 at the age of eighty-seven.

“Something to Think About”: The Playwright’s Paradoxical Perspectives

Like Effie Ellsler, Mary Roberts Rinehart was a successful woman whose pursuit of creative ambitions necessitated the navigation of changing cultural norms. Born in Pittsburgh in 1876, she trained as a nurse and then married Dr. Stanley Rinehart before she was twenty. She focused on raising their three sons before turning to writing, supposedly in order to create extra income for the family. Her first play, *The Double Life* (1906), was developed under the guidance of famed impresario David Belasco, but she alienated him when she turned down his offer to produce the play. Instead, she found a production through her agent, Beatrice de Mille, whom Rinehart praised in her autobiography as “indomitable” (*My Story* 102) because of de Mille’s success as a woman in a largely male profession. Very early on, Rinehart recognized the sexism of the theater world.

Women as playwrights were supposed to have less chance of good press than men. I think now that this was an error; certainly several women had written and produced successful plays, and had been well received by critics. The idea, however, was general among those agents whose business it was to place plays with managers, and when that first play of mine was finally produced, I was billed on it as Rinehart Roberts. (*My Story* 97-98)

Like theatrical agents and playwrights, detectives were also generally presumed to be male, and the

triumph of *The Bat*’s amateur female sleuth can be read as a reflection of Rinehart’s own success as a woman in a realm dominated by men.

While still in her early thirties, her first novel, *The Circular Staircase* (1908), became a best-seller. Rinehart was extremely prolific, writing at least one novel per year, plus short stories, magazine articles, and plays. Heralded in a 1922 profile as “the most successful and highest paid woman writer in the world” (“Life Means Work”), she had sold over 10,000,000 books by the time of her death in 1958 (“Mary Roberts Rinehart”). Throughout her career, Rinehart expressed a combination of progressive and conservative views on the subject of intelligent and independent women. For example, in an interview from 1922, she commented on women’s recently won right to vote:

The enfranchisement of the women, I am confident, is going to solve many of these problems that now perplex the strong minds of the nation. The right of suffrage is going to work wonders for the women themselves. It is going to give them something to think about. It is going to place a responsibility upon them that they never had before, and they will be stronger and happier for it. (“Life Means Work”)

Speaking of the need for women to develop their minds and engage with the world, Rinehart could just as easily be describing Cornelia, who needs to engage her mind and confront problems rather than run away, and the struggle makes her stronger and happier. Rinehart is also, to some extent, defending her readers and her own practice of writing mysteries. These complex stories about the detection of crime activate the mind in a way that is both pleasurable and, in Rinehart’s view, productive.

However, Rinehart goes on to explain that this substantial shift in women’s position in society will in no way change the social order. Far from being radical, she, as a married woman with a phenomenally successful career, argues that a woman who pursues a career poses no threat to traditional notions of marriage and motherhood.

The average woman wants to bear a child. The desire is inherent. It is the most natural thing in the world. . . . But a lot of good folk think that woman’s entrance in the industrial channels is ruining her domestic ideas, and that the working girl, trained to independence by earning her own income, will spurn matrimony. I

don't think so, not if the right man comes along, and the right man usually comes along, doesn't he?... There may be exceptions, but a woman wants a husband and her own home... I don't think matrimony is in danger. ("Life Means Work")

Rinehart, a life-long conservative Republican who had little sympathy for radical causes, creates an essentialist rhetoric that "naturalizes" compulsory heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood—but she still allows "there may be exceptions." One of those exceptions is her own creation, Cornelia Van Gorder. At no point in *The Bat* does Cornelia express any desire for having—or, for that matter, regrets over not having—a husband or a child. She is presented not as "unnatural," but as admirable.

Along with being grounded in the presumption of heterosexuality, the rhetoric surrounding enfranchisement, work, marriage, and motherhood implicitly pertains to White and middle-class women, since non-White women were not explicitly enfranchised by the Nineteenth Amendment, and the concept of "financial independence" would have functioned quite differently for working-class women. Indeed, part of what allows both Cornelia Van Gorder and Mary Roberts Rinehart time to exercise their intellectual abilities is the presence of servants, including working-class women and people of color. Along with her maid Lizzie, Cornelia also employs the household butler Billy, who is derogatorily referred to as "that Jap" throughout the script. Billy is stereotypically "inscrutable" and therefore a serviceable red herring as a murder suspect, but he proves to be neither sinister nor heroic. The role was played by a White actor in yellowface, as was the typical practice on Broadway for much of the twentieth century.⁴

In real life, Mary Roberts Rinehart employed a Filipino-American cook. Blas Reyes worked for Rinehart for twenty-five years, and she assures the reader in her autobiography, "To me he was always a white man" (*My Story* 561). Horrifically, Reyes tried to murder Rinehart in the summer of 1947, coming after her first with a gun, then with knives, but he was subdued and apprehended, and papers reported that he died by suicide in jail. Although she claims to pay no mind to racial

difference, Rinehart attributes Reyes' murderousness to the fact that he "had become race conscious." The implication is that to be conscious of race is a sort of dangerous madness that threatens White people like herself, and so Rinehart advocates for race blindness. But it is perhaps this same "blindness" that, twenty-five years earlier, allowed her to create a stereotypical Japanese servant in *The Bat*. The independent woman does not exist outside of constructions of race and class, and an appreciation of the female detective, like the female author, must take into account how other forms of oppression exist in relation to her success.

"Good Entertainment with a Message": Critical Reception and the Fate of *The Bat*

Although *The Bat* concerns the triumph of a woman's mind, critics writing about the initial Broadway run of this thriller focused more on the physical than the intellectual. Robert Benchley described the audience's experience as one of "leaping about in your seat in a state bordering on epilepsy, pressing moist palms on the sleeves of the people on either side of you, reassuring yourself with little nervous laughs that this is only the theater, and then collapsing into the aisle at the end of each act." Alexander Woollcott of *The New York Times* generously informed readers that *The Bat* "is immensely amusing if you don't pucker your brow and take it seriously" ("A Rinehart Mystery Staged"). Woollcott also noted the gender dynamic of the play, asserting that Rinehart

is happiest when a sharp-tongued, self-possessed woman with iron gray hair is present to dominate the scene, especially if a comic maid servant can also attend, to [...] appear at the climax [...] muttering "Drat the man!"

In this case, "self-possessed" can refer not just to being calm and collected, but to the fact that Cornelia, not being possessed by any man, is truly liberated.

While Woolcott lamented the use of clichéd genre conventions in the play, he recognized them as conventions that Rinehart herself invented. Indeed, her reputation as a mystery writer caused some critics to doubt that Hopwood, who was better known for racy sex comedies like the concurrently running *Gold Diggers*, had much to do with the actual writing of *The Bat*. Referring to their collaboration, the *Billboard* critic Patterson James reiterated the play's dynamic of elevating a smart woman over miscreant men, admonishing Hopwood that the high quality of *The Bat* "should demonstrate to him that literary partnership with a gentlewoman is preferable to association with garbage pails." According to Rinehart's autobiography, the two writers often worked together in the same room, with the following division of labor: "It was my part to devise scenes and situations and rattle off dialogue; it was Hopwood's to watch structure and provide wit" (*My Story* 110).⁵

The *Variety* critic had no patience for the play, finding it poorly acted and devoid of "logic and good sense," and predicted that it would "keep its hold on the public affections for three months or so" ("Review"). Instead, it ran for two years, making it second only to Frank Bacon and Winchell Smith's *Lightnin'* (1918) in the length of its Broadway run, although both were eventually eclipsed by Anne Nichols' *Abie's Irish Rose*. At one point, six different road companies toured the country, boasting particularly lengthy runs in Chicago and Philadelphia. The 1922 London production, which featured a young Claude Rains, was also successful, running for 327 performances. When the authors finally sold the film rights, newspapers described *The Bat* as "the world's most famous mystery play" ("*Bat Will Be Filmed*"). Roland West's 1926 silent film version, which employed an expressionist visual sensibility, served as the conduit to *The Bat*'s most enduring contribution to contemporary popular culture. Featuring elements such as a circular searchlight with the silhouette of a bat, and a character who wears a bat-like costume with a tool belt and swings around an urban landscape on a rope with a grappling hook, the film is said to have inspired Bob Kane, the creator of the comic book crime-fighting hero, Batman (Kane 38).

Over the four decades following its Broadway run, in addition to numerous amateur and stock productions, *The Bat* had three film versions, two television adaptations, and two Broadway revivals. The actresses who played Cornelia Van Gorder ranged in age from fifty-four to seventy-four, and many of them had made careers of playing strong older women, including Emily Fitzroy (film 1926), Minnette Barrett (Broadway 1937), Lucile Watson (Broadway 1953), Estelle Winwood (television 1953), Agnes Moorehead (film 1959), and Helen Hayes (television 1960). By the time the play turned fifty, it seemed to have worn out its welcome. Dan Sullivan, reviewing a student production in Los Angeles in 1971, completely dismissed the play, writing, "In the short run, trash will always outpoint art. In the long run, though, it is made obsolete by a slicker kind of trash, and that is exactly what has happened to *The Bat*." During the years of the play's final throes, *Variety* reported in 1978 that Lillian Gish, then eighty-five years old, might star in a new film version ("Pickford-Rogers Talk"), and *The New York Times* reported in 1980 that Claudette Colbert, then seventy-seven years old, had signed on to star in a Broadway revival (Lawson). Neither of these projects was realized.

The demise of *The Bat* might also be attributed to the changing role of spinsters within the popular imagination. Naomi Braun Rosenthal argues that the spinster, once an avatar of "feminine freedom," was, between the World Wars, increasingly recast as an example of "feminine failure" (13). The celibacy of the spinster, once a sign of her respectability, came to be seen as a sexual pathology (116), and spinsters went from being strong and independent to being depicted as "unhappy and repressed" (131). The "new woman" became an "old maid," a comic figure associated with old-fashioned eccentricities and outmoded Victorian manners. Case in point: after Cornelia Van Gorder, the most popular spinsters to appear on the Broadway stage were the elderly Brewster sisters of *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1941) by Joseph Kesselring, which casts the women not as detectives, but as murderers. The comedy relies on the incongruity of two dotty "little old ladies" killing a

series of male victims with poisoned elderberry wine, making the spinster a comic antimother, deadly rather than nurturing, and pathologically insane. Still, even with this radical shift in the character of the spinster, *Arsenic and Old Lace* ironically encourages the audience to root for these women to succeed in committing crimes, just as they rooted for Cornelia to succeed in solving crimes.

Perhaps one of the reasons *The Bat* flew for as long as it did is because Cornelia is an excellent role for older women who do not have many opportunities to perform a leading part. The mostly male critics may have been correct in their assessment of the play's dramatic merits, but they also overlooked the potential pleasure for an audience that enjoyed seeing a sixty-something-year-old woman triumph over villainous men by using her wits and her nerves. Furthermore, the play's intelligence endures, as noted by a critic from the *Los Angeles Times* when reviewing a rare professional revival, produced by Theatre 40 in Beverly Hills in 2012. The review emphasized the play's "notable level of wit, sophistication and slyly subversive offhand quips" (Brandes). Even if the play's genre conventions and plot contortions are now hopelessly dated, perhaps the play—not unlike its author and its heroine—can still be praised for using its wits.

In Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), a character ironically opines, "Oh—why can't we have plays like we used to have—*Peg O' My Heart*, and *Smilin' Thru*, and *The Bat*, good entertainment with a message you can take home with you?" (Wilder 115). The joke, of course, is that these three plays, then over twenty years old, are presumed to be light entertainment that have no message at all. But *The Bat* contains messages both explicit and implicit—as do the reviews, interviews, and publicity that accompanied the original production of the play—about the empowerment and independence of women. These messages are often contradictory, and their feminist potential is limited by the racism and classism of the theater and theater-making culture of its era. Mary Roberts Rinehart and Avery Hopwood's mystery-thriller, which was good entertainment for an audience of

millions, may no longer be good entertainment for a contemporary audience, but it remains a rich site for exploring the roles of women both on and off-stage, at a turning point in American culture.⁶

Notes

1. Over the course of the 1920s, the Broadway run of *The Bat* was second only to *Abie's Irish Rose* (1922), Anne Nichols' rather conventional comedy about an interfaith marriage, which ran for an unprecedented 2,327 performances. See Schildcrout, *In the Long Run: A Cultural History of Broadway's Hit Plays*, Chapter 2.

2. Women playwrights fared especially well but did not achieve gender parity on Broadway in the 1920s. Of the fifty-two Broadway plays that were popular enough to run over three hundred performances, more than a quarter of them (28.8%) were authored or co-authored by women, representing a significant increase over the previous decade's 5.5%.

3. Although thrillers are no longer as common on Broadway, the genre has proven especially enduring in England, where the longest running play in London's West End remains Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, which opened in 1952 and has been performed over 27,000 times as of 2018. See Schildcrout, *In the Long Run*, Chapter 7.

4. In this era, the most prominent example of yellowface in a popular Broadway play was Fay Bainter in the role of Ming Toy in *East is West* (1918), which ran for 680 performances. The practice (which also has a deep history in opera, musical theater, and film) is evident in subsequent hit Broadway plays including *The Shanghai Gesture* (1926), *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1953), and *A Majority of One* (1959). The rise of the ethnic theater movement and establishment of theater companies such as the East West Players (1965) and Pan Asian Rep (1977) challenged the use of yellowface, but still it persisted, most famously in the musical *Miss Saigon* (1991). See Lee (177-99), Moon (123-30), and Schildcrout (113-25).

5. Rinehart wrote her most successful plays in collaboration with Avery Hopwood, who once had four plays running simultaneously on Broadway and is often credited as the most commercially successful American playwright of the 1920s. Together they collaborated on three Broadway hits: *Seven Days* (1909), *Spanish Love* (1920), and their most enduring work, *The Bat*.

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